There is a significant difference between a reflection on Christian anti-Muslim polemic and a consideration of the dynamics that underlie that same polemic: the first is an analysis of what a Christian has said about Islam (and vice versa), which can often include inaccurate depictions of Islam and misrepresentations of theological ideas; the second is an attempt to understand the reasons why Christian and Muslim theologians simply could not accept or even comprehend the other’s theological position. It can be difficult to disentangle the two approaches, but in many cases this distinction can be seen in Christian reflections on Muslim anti-Christian polemic. For example, in his *Cur Deus homo?* Anselm writes:

> And this question, both infidels are accustomed to bring up against us, ridiculing Christian simplicity as absurd; and many believers ponder it in their hearts: for what cause or necessity, in sooth, God became man, and by his own death, as we believe and affirm, restored life to the world; when he might have done this by means of some other being, angelic or human, or merely by his will.

>*Cur Deus homo?* (1962: 192–3)

By infidels, Anselm is addressing Jews (Asiedu 2001: 533), but the same position can be extended to Muslims as an implicit critique of Muslim belief, since Jews and Muslims made similar attacks against the Christian theologies of the incarnation and redemption. In this short passage, Anselm is expressing the theological dynamic that lies beneath all Christian relations with Judaism and, by extension, Islam. At the centre of the Christian faith is a belief – Anselm states it is something that Christians ‘believe and confess’ (*nos credimus et confitemur*) – that God needed to become human in order to ‘restore life to the world’ (*mundo vitam reddiderit*). Muslim sources, including the Qur’an, also talk about God restoring life to the world (see O’Shaughnessy 1985: 70–89), though for Muslim theologians this did not require the incarnation of God. In this short passage, Anselm alludes to the fact that God’s redemption of the world did not necessarily have to take the form of the incarnation and self-sacrifice, since he states that in restoring life to the world, ‘he might have done this by means of some other being, angelic or human, or merely by his will’. Muslim theologians would find the latter – ‘merely by his will’ (*sola voluntate*) – to be the only theologically acceptable mechanism for ‘restoring life to the world’.
Anselm is not engaging in anti-Muslim polemic, but rather, through his exposition of the Christian belief that salvation and atonement are gained through the incarnation, he is explaining a Christian view of God that is completely incompatible with the Muslim world view. Anselm’s reflection on how God ‘restored life to the world’ has a resultant impact on how he views the Muslim understanding of the way in which God restored (or will restore) life to the world. This type of reflection is what will be meant by the term *theological dynamics* in this chapter: rather than a criticism of another faith for its ‘inaccurate’ view of God, the theological dynamics of Christian–Muslim relations examine the ideas that underlie the perception of the other. Consequently, this chapter will not use polemical texts as its main sources of Christian and Muslim belief but will rather make use of creedal statements. This is because creeds provide the background and dynamic with which polemicists approach the ‘other’. Creeds also provide summaries of belief rather than a single aspect of internal religious debate, to the extent that the Nicene Creed becomes a text that ‘underscores several key issues in Christology and Trinitarian theology hammered out during the earlier church councils’ (Renard 2011: 84). Within the Islamic context, creeds did not come to have the same liturgical function as the creeds within the Christian tradition, but in a creedal text such as the *Fiqh Akbar*, ‘All of its ten articles are clearly responses to disputed questions, since neither the transcendent oneness of God, nor the prophetic mandate of Muhammad was among these; even these most fundamental tenets receive no mention here’ (Renard 2011: 85).

This chapter will focus on two areas. The first section will explore the concept of revelation and the finality of religion: both the Christian and Muslim scriptures link finality with Jesus and Muhammad. For Christians the emergence of a new prophet after Jesus was impossible, and for Muslims the failure to accept Muhammad as a prophet is itself *kufr* (‘unbelief’). This also brings into question the role and status of the Christian and Muslim scriptures: the critiques of the others’ scriptures have at their very heart the question of authority.

The second section will explore Christian and Muslim understandings of God and God’s relation to the world. For Christians, the Persons of the Trinity accounted for the different activities of God and engagements with the human realm. Consequently, the strict monotheism of Islam with an utterly transcendent God seems stark and bare and could not account for aspects of the personal experience of God experienced in revelation. From the Muslim perspective, the emphasis on *tauhid* (‘the oneness of God’ or ‘divine unicity’) made the Trinitarian Persons of a monotheistic God incomprehensible and tritheistic. Theological ideas related to the Trinity, notably harmartiology and pneumatology, which are bound to theologies of the Son and the Spirit, are also crucial to understanding the theological dynamics of Muslim–Christian relations. The differing views of Christians and Muslims on sin and its forgiveness had an impact on polemic, since for Christians the atoning sacrifice of Jesus is central to its views on sin and redemption, whereas for Muslims forgiveness requires no formal mechanism other than God’s will. The action of the Spirit and its relationship with the Church also generated a significant divide between Christian and Muslim understandings of the way in which God interacts with the world.

The finality of revelation

One of the most basic dynamics of interreligious dialogue and interaction is the belief that there is no need for the other. In modern times there has been a move towards pluralist philosophies of religion, most notably advocated by John Hick (2005); yet other theologians have noted the essential exclusivity of religious belief – by holding one belief, other possibilities are excluded (D’Costa 2000). The Christian and Muslim medieval worlds were inherently exclusivist, both in their internal and external relations, although some theologians on both sides did discuss the
Dynamics of Christian–Muslim relations

salvation of nonbelievers (Khalil 2012; Khalil 2013; Ramelli 2013). This internal exclusivity is patent in the decrees of the Ecumenical Church Councils, which created doctrinal barriers between internal divisions, such as the exclusion of the monophysites from the wider Church after the Council of Chalcedon. Likewise, Muslim divisions between Sunnīs and Shiʿīs are centred on doctrines of spiritual leadership. Naturally, when considering another religion and not just an internal debate or division, the exclusivity is equally, if not more, obvious.

In the medieval world the binary division between belief and unbelief was central to both Christian and Muslim world views. For Christians, people were conceived as being either within the community or outside it, with elements of exclusion being maintained within the liturgy: those who were seen as being outside the community for holding heretical beliefs or committing certain sins were excluded from taking communion and participating in the rites and rituals of the Church (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:5) in the hope to encourage repentance (see van der Paverd 1981; Collins 1980); and in a number of early liturgies, nonbaptised members seeking admission to the Christian faith (catechumens) were instructed to leave the service before the Eucharistic rite itself began (Kunzler 2001: 205–6).

Similar debates about the effect of sins on a person’s membership of the community (umma) and whether certain sins meant that an individual then lacked faith (imān) also appeared in Islam (see Watt 1967). For Muslims, intrareligious debate flourished, with each group accusing others of heresy (Daftary 2005: 2–3); but differences also emerged in specific liturgical actions such as the Sunnī and Shiʿī calls to prayer (adḥān) and the way in which the ablutions were performed before the ritual prayers. It is, therefore, necessary to bear in mind a religious world view in which distinctions between the insider and the outsider were stark and often clearly demarcated.

The rigid exclusivity of formal theology in the late antique and medieval periods results in a stance of looking at the ‘other’ with incredulity, as has been seen in Anselm’s introduction to his Cur Deus Homo? The dynamic of incredulity drives all polemic, with the detailed and specific critiques of the ‘other’ seen in polemic works being derived from this theological incomprehension. Both Christian and Muslim theologians of the medieval period regarded their own religions to be complete: hence for Christians, the Qurʾān and Islam represented an unnecessary and unwarranted revelation, while for Muslims, Christians had corrupted the scripture (kitāb) that was revealed to them. Both religions saw themselves as the climax and culmination in the greater salvation-historical scheme: the redemptive action of Jesus Christ through his self-sacrifice on the cross represented a means to return sinful humanity to a position of grace (John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 5:18–19; Colossians 1:19), while Muslims saw the Prophet Muḥammad as the ‘seal of the Prophets’ (khāṭān al-nabīyyīn, Q 33:40) and the giver of the final revelation of God to humanity. The Muslim failure to see Jesus’ death in terms of atonement and propitiation for sin (Romans 3:25; 1 John 2:2) – or indeed to deny it completely – alongside the Christian failure to accept the prophethood of Muhammad created a wide theological gulf between Christian and Muslim.

The sense of each religion as the culmination of salvation history can be seen in the Muslim discourses of taḥrīf (‘falsification’), in which the Qurʾān and later polemicists attacked Christians for corrupting the text of the scripture (kitāb, or more specifically the Injīl) that God gave them through Jesus (Reynolds 2010; Pulcini 1998; Thomas 1996). The corruption was not simply a matter of accidental textual confusion but a consequence of distorted theology and was primarily focused on the Christian scriptures’ teachings about the divinity of Jesus and his being the ‘Son of God’. The Muslim doctrine of taḥrīf is qurʾānic (Q 4:46; 5:13), so it presents a firm basis for later Muslim anti-Christian polemic as well as a basic premise for Muslim theologians.

It is also possible to see this aspect of polemic acting as an underlying dynamic in the Ḥadīth literature. In the accounts of the first revelation to Muḥammad (al-Bukhārī 1998: 21–2; Ibn Isḥāq 1967: 104–7), following his first experience he returns to his wife Khadīja in a state of anxiety.
and distress, a theme also common in biblical experiences of revelation (see Watt 1969: 12–17), and she sends him to see her cousin Waraqa ibn Nawfāl, whom the sources describe as a pious Christian. Muḥammad relates to Waraqa what has happened to him, and Waraqa declares that he has been visited by the nāmūs, meaning that he has seen the angel Gabriel and received a revelation from God. What is important here is the fact that the Islamic tradition uses a Christian to authenticate the prophethood of Muḥammad. This is also seen in the story of the mission to Heraclius, in which the Christian emperor acknowledges Muḥammad as a prophet (El Cheikh 1999; Pouzet 1992; Burge 2011: 177–88). The use of ‘outsiders’ to construct a discourse of validity is not new to Islam – e.g. the adoration of Magi (Matthew 2:11), the centurion at the foot of the cross (Matthew 27:54) etc. – but it has an implicit reference of the doctrine of tahrīf: the acceptance of Muḥammad as a prophet by learned Christians indicates the error of the Christian scriptures and doctrine. Muslim authors also sought to read the Bible in order to see predictions of Muḥammad’s coming, which had been misunderstood and misinterpreted by Christians (Lazarus-Yafeh 1992: 75–110).

The late antique and medieval Christian response to Islam, with regard to its own assumptions that Christianity is the culmination of salvation history, was to regard Muḥammad as the Antichrist. This view can be seen in texts written during the very early Christian encounters with Islam which interpreted its advent in eschatological terms (Brock 1982). It has its roots in biblical sources, particularly the warnings against new teachers confessing beliefs that go against the teachings of the Church in 1 John, and was an idea that persisted into the Early Modern period (Lamoreaux 1996; Akbari 1997). It is necessary to take such strident polemic in the context of its underlying dynamic: for Christians the only route to salvation was through the person of Christ, and Christianity, indeed the Church as a corporate institution, was the only vehicle through which that salvation could be mediated; any attempts to advocate a discourse outside these parameters were, naturally, perceived as the influence of the Devil or worse. It should be noted that it was not just Muhammad who was labelled the Antichrist in Christian tradition, but a whole host of other figures that were perceived to be leading people away from the true faith, both from within and without (Ryan 2009; Russell 1994).

The belief that their own religion was the final and complete revelation necessarily led both Christian and Muslim theologians to certain conclusions about the ‘other’. In a sense it concerns the theological need for the other to accept the ‘true’ religion: for a Christian, salvation history is perfected and completed in the person and self-sacrifice of Jesus (Hebrews 12:2), for a Muslim the Qurʾān is the final revelation, and one that forcefully denies that God could beget another being (Q 112). These two positions are mutually incompatible and irreconcilable on the most fundamental level. The differences are not simply theological but form the basis and dynamics of a range of different polemical attacks on the other.

**God’s relation to the world**

The Christian belief in the Trinity and the way in which the persons of the Trinity interact with the human realm, alongside the Muslim stress on the oneness of God, underlies much of Christian–Muslim relations and polemic on both sides. This can be seen in the earliest interaction between Christians and Muslims; indeed the doctrines of the incarnation of Jesus and the Trinity are boldly criticised in the Qurʾān itself: ‘say not “Three”: desist, it will be better for you: for Allah is One God: Glory to Him: (far exalted is He) above having a son’ (Q 4:171). The Christian belief in the Trinity became the focus of postqurʾānic polemic, such as Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq’s Al-radd ʿalā al-thalāth firaq min al-Naṣārā (Thomas 1992; see also Beaumont 2012). It appears equally strongly in the creedal literature; for example, the creed (ʿaqīda) of al-Ashʿarī,
Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn, includes the statement: ‘God is one deity, unique, eternal; there is no deity except Him; He has not taken to Himself consort or child’ (Watt 1994: 41, §2). The Muslim emphasis on divine unicity means that Muslim thinkers perceived the Trinity as a tritheistic system: Abū ‘Isā’s polemic against the Trinity is made not simply because he disagreed with the Trinity from a purely intellectual standpoint but because he held to the strict monotheism of the Qur’ān, which appeared incompatible with the Christian vision of God. However, it is important to take a step back from the formal doctrines of the Trinity and tawḥīd and reflect on the underlying dynamics of these two visions of monotheism. The differences between the Christian and Muslim monotheisms lie in their respective conceptions of the way in which God interacts with the world.

For Christians, the different Persons of the Trinity articulate the different ways in which God interacts with creation. The relationship between the three Persons may have generated intense debate and speculation, but it made the rigidly monotheistic position taken by Islam seem extremely stark and bare. More importantly, however, Christians made use of Trinitarian theology to explain different aspects of its world view, such as the belief that God is Creator and has ultimate sovereignty; that the heavenly and earthly realms are united in the person of Jesus; and that God is present with Christians at all times through the Spirit. For Muslims, such a division of the activities of the Godhead are unthinkable. The debates about the createdness of the Qur’ān focused on a similar aspect: for Mu‘tazilīs, making the Qur’ān the uncreated, pre-existent word (kalām) of God threatened the integrity of God. (Wolfson 1976: 263–303) The Christian and Muslim understandings of the Godhead were so fundamentally opposed that there was little willingness to understand the other’s view: this forms one of the central dynamics of Muslim–Christian relations, particularly on a theological level.

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Forgiveness is a divine prerogative in Islam, and the extent to which this had to be just generated much discussion in later Muslim theology, particularly in discussions about theodicy (Ormsby 1984). The mechanism of what Christians would call ‘grace’ is extremely simple in Islam, happening as a result of the divine decree. In the passage from the Cur Deus homo? quoted earlier, Anselm alludes to the possibility that God could ‘restore life to the world’ through ‘His will’, and this is the Muslim mechanism of all divine interaction with the world: cities are destroyed through God’s will, revelation is given through God’s will and life and death are given through God’s will.

This simple mechanism of redemption through God’s will is not the case in Christian theology: Christian harmatiology is far more spiritualised. The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden is viewed by Christians as an irreconcilable separation from the divine world, until the sins of the world are reconciled through the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ. In Pauline theology Jesus comes to be seen as a ‘Second Adam’, the person through whom readmittance to heaven becomes possible (Romans 5:12–21; 1 Corinthians 15:22; see also Black 1954; Wilken 1966). The mechanism for divine grace is through the sacrifice of the Son, as Augustine writes in De Trinitate:

Therein is our true peace and firm bond of union with our Creator, that we should be purified and reconciled through the Mediator of life, as we had been polluted and alienated, and so had departed from Him, through the mediator of death. For as the devil through pride led man through pride to death; so Christ through lowliness led back man through obedience to life.

(IV:10 §13; 1887: 76)

The various doctrines of atonement that were developed in ancient, medieval and modern Christian theologies are an attempt to understand the way in which grace happened and how the sins of the world and the evil of humanity could be reconciled with the purity and transcendent good of the divine (see Pugh 2014; Sykes 1990). Whether one talks of atonement or a process of theosis, as in the Eastern tradition (see Kharlamov 2011), the underlying theological dynamic is one in which divine grace is mediated through the self-sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The activity and process of divine forgiveness in Christianity and Islam creates a great chasm between each of their respective theologies of sin, grace and forgiveness. These differences in their views of sin inevitably influenced the perception of the ‘other’ a great deal; but it is a difference that is essentially concerned with the way God and humanity interact with each other.

For Christians, the person of Christ as both God and Man forms the fundamental relationship between the divine and human realms and unites the two. In the Muslim world view, heaven and earth are much more distinct and discrete realms. As in Judaism, Islam establishes the heavenly and earthly realms as utterly distinct spheres – what Gammie has called ‘cosmic’ or ‘spatial’ dualism (Gammie 1974). For Christians, the separation between heaven and earth is weakened in the person of Jesus and through the activity of the Spirit.

If the activity of the Son in Christian theology uniting the heavenly and the earthly and enabling reconciliation and atonement between the two establishes an underlying theological dynamic that is incompatible with the Muslim world view, the two religions also differ in aspects of the understanding of the activity of the Spirit (pneumatology). Muslims and Christians do take a similar view on the mechanisms relating to the giving of the Spirit, in that the Spirit of God is subject to the will of God (that is the Spirit is sent); however, there are important differences in the understanding of the resultant activities of the Spirit. For Christians, the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (John 14:16, 26; Acts 2) established the Church as a mediator between God and humanity, with the creation of an elite who can forgive and condemn sins (Matthew 18:18).
Consequently, the Church became a mediatory vehicle for the action of the Spirit within the world; an ecclesial structure that is inherently incompatible with the Muslim world view. The creed of Ahmad ibn Hanbal includes the following statement: ‘God speaks to human beings, and there is no interpreter between Him and them’ (Watt 1994: 31, § 8). The rejection of any institutional mediation of divine grace created a further barrier between Christian and Muslim interaction, and one that had political as well as theological significance.

Theological dynamics in Christian–Muslim relations

This chapter has attempted to outline some of the basic beliefs which Christians and Muslims had before coming into contact with each other. In a world in which theology created intense binary relationships between those who were inside the faith and those who were outside, internal religious beliefs form the starting point of polemical writing. Scholars engaging with the ‘other’ were confronted with ideas and beliefs that seemed entirely alien and unbelievable – this is even before the other’s theology is examined in detail. As people of faith, Christians contemplating Islam, and vice versa, would have seen no need for the existence of the other at the most basic level. If salvation can only be obtained through the acceptance of Jesus as the Son of God, then a religion that advocates the humanity of Jesus and rejects his divinity is simply ‘wrong’; likewise, Muslims were shocked by a religion that professed to be monotheist yet was clearly in error since Christians prayed to a God that appeared tritheistic. The polemical attacks seen in the medieval period grew out of these basic theological and creedal assumptions.

The Christian view of God, the world and the relationship between the two generated a complex world view which was focused on the spiritual reconnection of humanity to the divine: the sending of the Son was part of this salvation-historical plan to redeem the world and to reconcile a world of sin with the divine truth; similarly, the creation of the Church as a mediator of divine grace was an articulation of the activity of God on earth. These theological positions are basic assumptions of Christians, albeit ones that were articulated in different ways by individuals and wider groups of Christians. However, these basic assumptions are in direct conflict with Muslim views of sin, in which there is no need for a mechanism for atonement; likewise, there is no priestly mediation between God and humanity. The contrast between the beliefs of the insider and outsider create a natural theological disjunction that leads to the rejection of the other and, at times, specific polemical attacks. In the medieval world, all polemic has at its very centre this dynamic of disjunction, separation and incredulity: there is no need for the other, nor is there any possibility to try and understand it from a theological perspective – the ‘other’ is continually played against the ‘true’ faith and found lacking, leading to direct polemic. Theological dynamics such as these were the starting place for Muslims and Christians to study one another and clearly influenced the way they engaged with each other in the medieval world.

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**Further reading**


